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AUTHOR Dunlap, Glen; Fox, Lise
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ABSTRACT

This digest provides an overview of considerations for teaching students with autism. General considerations for providing effective instruction for students with autism include: (1) ensure that the student is in good health, free from pain and irritation, and in a safe, stimulating, and pleasurable setting; (2) provide structure in the environment, with clear guidelines regarding expectations for appropriate and inappropriate behavior; (3) provide tools, such as written or picture schedules, to ensure that the flow of activities is understandable and predictable; (4) base the curriculum on the student's individual characteristics, not on the label of autism; (5) focus on developing skills that will be of use in the student's current and future life in school, home, and community; (6) carefully plan transitions to new placements and new school experiences; and (7) encourage parents and other family members to participate in the process of assessment, curriculum planning, instruction, and monitoring. Strategies for addressing communication issues and motivational issues are discussed, along with appropriate instructional formats and positive behavior support. Age-span considerations are also explored. (CR)

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TEACHING STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

By

GLEN DUNLAP & LISE FOX

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education
The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191-1589
1-800-328-0272; ericec@cec.sped.org; http://ericec.org

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Teaching Students with Autism

Glen Dunlap and Lise Fox

Autism is a disability syndrome characterized principally by significant problems in the development of communication and social functioning. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) encompasses a broad definition of autism that includes related disabilities such as Asperger Syndrome, Rett's Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder. Autism and ASD are labels describing students with a great range of abilities and disabilities, including individuals with severe intellectual challenges as well as students who are intellectually gifted. With appropriate teaching, all students with autism can learn.

This digest provides an overview of considerations for teaching students with autism. Students with autism are, first and foremost, students. They have many more similarities to other students than they do differences. Although some students with autism present genuine instructional challenges, they learn well with appropriate, systematic, and individualized teaching practices.

Some General Considerations of the Instructional Context

To provide effective instruction for students with autism, some general considerations should be addressed:

- Ensure that the student is in good health, free from pain and irritation, and in a safe, stimulating and pleasurable setting.
- Provide structure in the environment, with clear guidelines regarding expectations for appropriate and inappropriate behavior.
- Provide tools, such as written or picture schedules, to ensure that the flow of activities is understandable and predictable.
- Base the curriculum on the student's individual characteristics, not on the label of autism. A diagnosis of autism does not indicate what or how to teach.
- Focus on developing skills that will be of use in the student's current and future life in school, home, and community.
- Carefully plan transitions to new placements and new school experiences usually require careful planning and assistance.
- Encourage parents and other family members to participate in the process of assessment, curriculum planning, instruction, and monitoring. They often have the most useful information about the student's history and learning characteristics, so effective instruction should take advantage of this vital resource.

Communication Issues

Students with autism have significant challenges in understanding and using language for communication. Classroom environments must provide students with information on events, activities, and expectations in a manner that students with autism can easily understand. Visual activity schedules may be used to provide students with an overview of the instructional day and information on tasks that will be assigned. Many teachers also find mini-schedules helpful; they provide a visual analysis of the steps in a task or assignment that need completion by the student. In addition to providing supports for understanding classroom expectations, many students will also need supports for communicating to others. While most students with autism will learn to use speech to communicate, many still have great difficulty in expressing their needs and desires. They may need to use visual systems, sign language, or augmentative devices as an additional form of expressive communication.

Motivational Issues

It is important that the classroom environment provides activities and materials that are interesting and motivating. Actively engaging the student within instructional activities is critical to effective instruction. The teacher should observe the student in multiple activities and interview family members to identify the motivating activities or objects for the student. These preferred objects and activities may be used for instruction, or as reinforcers for activity engagement or completion. Instructional arrangements should also provide opportunities for choice-making to the student. Research has shown that when students have an opportunity to choose the activity, location, or materials for an instructional task, they are more likely to be engaged in the activity. Providing the student with frequent and personally meaningful reinforcement is often critical to sustaining motivation to engage in instruction and persist with activities.

Instructional Formats

Discrete trial training is an effective instructional format for teaching specific skills in an intensive, efficient manner. Skills are taught within a highly structured, one-to-one format providing clear and concise instruction, an additional prompt (as necessary), and an explicit reinforcer (reward) for performing the skill successfully. Discrete trial training typically uses a least-to-most prompting hierarchy, moving from a verbal prompt to physical guidance when verbal and nonverbal prompts are inadequate. Trials of instruction are provided on a single behavior in a massed fashion (one after another) with only a brief pause between trials.

Activity-based instruction describes the instruction of targeted skills within activities and routines that are meaningful for the student. Instructional trials are embedded within student-initiated, routine, or planned activities. Skills are taught within

relevant activities and across contexts, increasing the probability that the student will generalize the skill to noninstructional activities and environments. For example, an arrival routine for a student may include putting his backpack away, finding his desk, and taking out his daily work folder. If the student were learning how to greet others, request help, and follow a visual schedule, skill instruction could be embedded in the arrival routine and within multiple activities over the day so that an adequate number of instructional trials are provided to the student. Systematic instruction is used within each of those activities to provide instruction on the embedded skill.

Students with autism may also be taught effectively in small groups. In inclusive classrooms, nondisabled peers have been effective in providing instructional support. Cooperative learning groups also provide a format for includeing the student with autism who may be learning skills that are different from his peers.

Positive Behavior Support

Some students with autism may exhibit excessive passivity, while others display patterns of disruptive or even destructive behaviors. Years ago, the common response to these behaviors was punishment, time out, or exclusion to stop or suppress the behavior problems. The currently preferred approach is known as positive behavior support (PBS), a proactive, constructive educational approach for resolving behavior problems. It is based on extensive research as well as principles regarding the rights of all students to be treated with dignity and to have access to educational opportunities. The PBS approach is supported by the discipline regulations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

PBS involves a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and the subsequent development and implementation of an individualized behavior support plan. The FBA process gathers information about the purpose or "function" of the behavior and the circumstances associated with its occurrences and nonoccurrences. The results of the FBA contribute to the individualized behavior support plan, which usually includes procedures for teaching alternatives to the behavior problems, and alterations to the environmental and instructional circumstances most associated with the problems. Such alterations can involve aspects of the curriculum, instructional techniques, social milieu or other feature linked by the FBA to behavior problems. The PBS intervention helps prevent problems from occurring, and helps the student acquire more effective, desirable ways for interacting with the environment.

Age Span Considerations

The focus of instruction shifts as students with autism move from early childhood programs through elementary school to secondary settings. In the early years, instruction focuses on developing communication, social interaction, and adaptive behavior. As the child ages, elementary programs may focus more on academic instruction in addition to teaching language and social interaction skills. In secondary programs, instruction should shift to preparing the student for adulthood.

Instruction for young children should begin as soon as the disability is identified. Effective early intervention programs are ones that directly teach early communication and social interaction skills, use a functional approach in addressing problem behavior, provide intensive and systematic instruction, provide parent instruction and family support, and provide transition support as the child enters preschool.

In elementary school, instruction should support the child's growth in skill areas that are delayed and promote growth in areas of strength. Curriculum adaptations may be used to assist students in progressing in the traditional academic areas. School programs should also focus on helping the student learn how to negotiate social environments and develop friendships.

In the secondary and high school years, instruction should focus on the areas identified in the transition plan. The transition plan addresses post-school outcomes for work, community living, community participation, and recreation activities. Instruction for the transitioning student may include community work experience, using public transportation, and learning skills that will be important for living in the community. In high school, instruction may continue within general education settings although an individual student's schedule may reflect a greater emphasis on the importance of learning relevant post-school skills. For example, a student's schedule may include classes in computer, cooking, and chorus instead of courses in chemistry, algebra, and American literature.

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